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SUBJECT: Jalozai Refugees Returning . . . For Now

Ref: Islamabad 1602

¶1. (SBU) Summary. 1,135 families (6,474 individuals) have returned to Afghanistan from the Jalozai refugee camp in Pakistan since March 1, 2008. Due to adverse conditions in Afghanistan, some returnees may try to go back to Pakistan very soon.

¶2. (U) Almost two-thirds of Jalozai residents went to Nangarhar (672 families, 3,865 individuals); one-third to Kabul (388 families, 2,220 individuals); and a small amount to Gardez, Khost (75 families, 389 individuals). The focus on Nangarhar mirrors total returns from Pakistan so far this year: of the 4,904 families (29,431 individuals) who returned, 2,774 families (16,989 individuals) went to Nangarhar. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expects the heavy Nangarhar returns to continue since many Jalozai families were originally from Nangarhar and others may wish to stay close to Pakistan in case their menfolk return to Pakistan for work. This is a departure from the 2002-2007 trend, when the majority of returnees went to Kabul.

¶3. (SBU) Post Refugee Coordinator and Specialist met Jalozai returnees on April 22 at the Kabul Encashment Center, where refugees receive reintegration assistance funds and other services. Former camp residents understood that they had remained in the camp after the (multiple) camp closure deadlines passed but said elders had been trying to negotiate an extension (REFTEL). They described no violence against or by refugees, but registered with us their resentment over the camp's closure. UNHCR Kabul grumbled informally that Pakistan's actions amounted to forced repatriation but they are not protesting the closure since it was agreed upon last year in the Afghan/Pak/UNHCR Tripartite Agreement and with camp elders.

No Money, Nowhere To Go, Nothing To Do

¶4. (U) Options for newly returned refugees are severely limited. Most, if not all, have no skills and are landless, very poor, and have more young children and larger families than past returnees. For the moment, most will stay with relatives. Most are returning to a country that they have not seen for 20 years, if ever. Returnees we spoke to in Kabul were mostly from Parwan, Kunduz, and other places in the central and northern provinces. Some would try to set up small retail shops similar to those they had in Jalozai and, if they failed, would only then return to their province of origin. Many refugees told us they lost all their business capital in Pakistan when the authorities refused to give them time to

retrieve goods before bulldozing their shops.

That Was Quick: Refugees Already Recycling
Back To Pakistan

15. (U) The media reported on April 24 that five to ten recently repatriated families a day are already returning to Pakistan from Kandahar and Zabul due to Afghanistan's rising food prices and lack of employment. (Post is trying to confirm.) When these families officially repatriated, however, their Pakistani Proof of Registration (POR) cards were invalidated. The POR cards function as de facto refugee identity cards and without them, these recycled refugees are now illegal, undocumented migrants, subject to deportation at any moment. Several men we met at the Encashment Center had already repatriated to Afghanistan before but subsequently returned to Pakistan in search of work.

Impact on Refugees of Rising Food Prices

16. (U) Refugees are returning at a particularly difficult moment. Food prices have skyrocketed: the price of a 48 kilo bag of flour is 3500 Afghanis (\$70) but the average government employee earns 2500 Afghanis a month (\$50). Riot police had to disburse 1,000 protesters in Nangarhar on April 22 when they attacked flour trucks to protest the rising prices and Pakistan's flour export ban. The latter impacted many returning refugees when Pakistani border guards, citing the ban, seized their flour supplies even though UNHCR had negotiated an export allowance of two bags per family. The Afghan government announced on April 23 that it had allocated \$50 million to purchase additional food staples but when, how, and to whom the food will be distributed remains to be seen.

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Scene Calm At Kabul Encashment Center

17. (SBU) Refugees processed calmly through the Encashment Center, usually the first stop for refugees returning to the Kabul area. The families' rented Pakistani "jingle" trucks waited nearby, crammed with lumber, scrap metal, beds, wheelbarrows, and anything else that could be strapped on. Within 20-25 minutes, refugees went through a mine awareness briefing, medical check-up, and school registration. At the end, heads of household collected \$100 per family member, money meant to be a small business capital fund but often spent on meeting immediate needs of food, shelter, and transportation. UNHCR runs the six encashment centers in Nangarhar, Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, Gardez, and Mazar-e-Sharif. At the height of the summer repatriation season, some centers disburse up to \$400,000 a day. While the journey from Pakistan is relatively short, it can be perilous. Medical clinics at each enter treat injuries incurred when the top-heavy trucks overturn on the steep roads or when women fall trying to climb to their seats at the top of the truck in a burqa.

18. (SBU) While Jalozai's 80,000 residents have the option of relocating to other camps in Pakistan, UNHCR Kabul expects the majority to repatriate, along with other returnees from Pakistan and Iran. As Afghanistan's already minimal absorption capacity continues to be strained, we expect to see more recycling as refugees become frustrated with rising food prices and lack of employment in Afghanistan.

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